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Quality Assurance of Doctoral Studies in Romania - a PhD Candidates' Perspective

Anca Prisăcariu^a, Mihai Adrian Vilcea^{b*}

^aUniversity of Bucharest, Regina Elisabeta Boulevard 4 - 12, 030018, Bucharest, Romania

^bWest University of Timișoara, Vasile Parvan Boulevard 4, 300223, Timișoara, Romania

Abstract

Quality assurance and doctoral education have been considered priorities of the Bologna Process since the 2003 ministerial meeting in Berlin, but they have been developing on two different tracks.

Doctoral education is fundamentally different from first and second cycle. Based on the ARDE Project of the European University Association, the purposes of this paper are to analyze the Romanian context and provisions regarding the quality assurance of doctoral studies for the past years and, to offer a doctoral candidates' perspective on what should be the indicators that the quality assurance of doctoral studies should take into account.

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Keywords: doctoral studies, quality assurance, indicators, standards;

Nomenclature

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| A | EHEA – European Higher Education Area |
| B | EUA – European University Association |
| C | ESG – European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area |

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40763661036;.

E-mail address: mihai.vilcea@gmail.com

D	QA – Quality Assurance
E	HE – Higher Education
F	HEI – Higher Education Institution
G	ARACIS – Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
H	CNCS – National Council for Scientific Research
I	CNATDCU – National Council for Attesting the University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates
J	ARDE – “Accountable Research Environments for Doctoral Education” Project of EUA

Introduction

The basic principles governing both the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) and the Salzburg Principles for doctoral education, date from 2005, but their development happened in very different contexts. Quality assurance has been mostly related to universities’ teaching mission and the main focus has been on the first two cycles, while doctoral education has been closely linked to research.

Within institutions, the two have typically been under different governance structures, quality assurance under the vice-rector for academic affairs and doctoral education under the vice-rector for research.

Doctoral education is a core element of the traditional identity of a university. In most countries, only universities can confer the doctoral degree, and they see this as one (if not the) activity that defines them as institutions. University staff are also heavily invested in the area. The close, master-apprentice relation between supervisor and supervisee is the foundation of the traditional view of the doctorate as a rite of passage, an initiation to the scientific community, the *res publica literaria*. Doctoral education was the ground where scholars could plant their ideas and pass them on to the next generation. To this day, academics who have long earned their spurs will still, in some countries, be identified by the supervisor of their doctoral.

Doctoral education as a rite of passage happens in the private sphere where ideas reign free from interference from institutions. Those faithful to this tradition would be very wary of institutions and lawmakers introducing reforms that potentially endanger this tradition. In this context, quality assurance can almost amount to sacrilege, disturbing a ritual, which for centuries has been a cornerstone of academic identity. This leads to a discussion on one of the key challenges of quality assurance in higher education – how to ensure the participation, acceptance and commitment of academic staff.

Doctoral education is not only important for the supervisor or supervisee; it is a vital activity for universities in developing research and talent. As research has become an increasingly important element in economic development, governments and society at large alike are concerned that investments in doctoral education are appropriately managed, that education is fit for purpose, theses are finished and quality is ensured. Doctoral candidates not least have the right to enjoy transparent structures with clear rights and responsibilities as well as the assurance that they will be part of inclusive and inspiring research environments. Doctoral education has come into focus with several new laws being prepared or implemented across the European continent. If the value of doctoral education is to be upheld, there is no hiding behind traditions, but there must be a thorough reflection on how the good elements of the traditional model can be embedded in an accountable, well-managed institutional framework. As this view has gained ground, the parallel tracks of doctoral education and quality assurance have begun to be connected.

During the last decade, universities have been a main driver in the reform of doctoral education. They have established institutional units, doctoral schools, to manage a growing number of doctoral candidates, develop programmes and not least develop doctoral education-specific processes for quality assurance – often not recognized as quality assurance and independent from the quality assurance done for the first and second cycle. In 2010, EUA launched the Salzburg II Recommendations, a product of consultation with European universities to collect the experiences of the reforms, including quality assurance. Here it was stated that:

It is necessary to develop specific systems for quality assurance in doctoral education based on the diverse institutional missions and, crucially, linked to the institutional research strategy. For this reason, there is a strong link between the assessment of the research of the institution and the assessment of the research environments that form

the basis of doctoral education. Assessment of the academic quality of doctoral education should be based on peer review and be sensitive to disciplinary differences.

In order to be accountable for the quality of doctoral programmes, institutions should develop indicators based on institutional priorities such as individual progression, net research time, completion rate, transferable skills, career tracking and dissemination of research results for early stage researchers, taking into consideration the professional development of the researcher as well as the progress of the research project.

As is clear from this quote, the basis for quality assurance in doctoral education should be research; the quality of the research environment is the basis of the whole notion of quality in doctoral education and this will require different approaches from the quality assurance developed for the first and second cycles. However, accountability and enhancement as factors of quality assurance and the demand for transparency are just as relevant for doctoral education as for the first two cycles.

1. Quality Assurance and Doctoral Education

1.1. Ongoing European Reforms

As doctoral education has become more structured and programmes have grown due to increasing numbers of doctoral candidates, accountability has become increasingly important. The fact that doctoral education has acquired more significance in education and research policies has only accentuated this trend.

While some countries in Europe have been establishing national quality assurance agencies and developing national quality assurance regimes since the late 1980s and to an increasing extent since the mid 1990s, the real rise of quality assurance has taken place in the last decade. In addition to the quality assurance developments, doctoral education has seen considerable reforms in most of Europe. As early as the 1990s, some countries were embarking on changing the managerial framework for doctoral education as well as developing more structured forms of delivery.

Doctoral schools were being established in the Netherlands and Denmark, and the German Research Foundation began to fund Research Training Groups with the specific aim of moving away from a highly individualized model of delivery based on the personal master-apprentice relation between supervisor and supervisee. Instead, the goal was to enhance institutional responsibility in order to integrate doctoral candidates in a research environment beyond the activities of their supervisor and to facilitate, for example cross-disciplinary research groups.

In the same period, the provision of doctoral education grew at a fast pace. As the notion of the knowledge economy spread, and the EU launched its Lisbon Strategy to make Europe the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”, many countries made big investments in doctoral education. In the OECD as a whole, the annual growth rate of doctoral graduations was 5% from 2000 to 2010; 12 in some countries, such as Denmark, Norway and Italy, the number of doctoral graduations doubled within the decade or even less.¹³ This rapid growth, combined with increased political attention to investments in research, is important for understanding the context in which the reforms in doctoral education took place.

Particularly with the inclusion of the ‘third cycle’ in the Bologna Process in 2003, reforms began to be introduced across Europe. Structured programmes with taught elements were established, in some countries copying Bologna elements such as ECTS, and institutions began to develop professional management of doctoral education.

In 2005, EUA published the Salzburg Principles as a response to the Bergen Communiqué of the Bologna Process, which had explicitly called for “basic principles for doctoral programmes”.¹⁴ The Salzburg Principles were instrumental in shaping the reforms of doctoral education. They underlined the importance of research, but stated that research should be embedded in institutional strategies and contain room for a diversity of practices and programmes.

The vehicle for a more managerial culture has been predominantly the doctoral school. The concept of a doctoral school could originally cover everything from a doctoral programme with a few doctoral candidates to a university-wide management unit. There has, however, been a noticeable change in the common usage of the term towards a unit concerned with overall strategic management rather than an individual programme. Some universities have doctoral schools for each faculty; others have one school to manage all activities in doctoral education (sometimes

called the ‘umbrella model’). In each case, the establishment of doctoral schools points to an increase in institutional engagement ideally complementing the individual master-apprentice relationship.

Increasing institutional engagement has allowed institutions to develop career services for doctoral candidates and, not least, to establish quality assurance processes, which in many systems had been completely absent. This being said, the move towards a professional management of doctoral education has brought with it a number of processes that are de facto quality assurance processes, but without having been defined as such

1.2. Romanian National Context

In Romania, quality assurance has focused on universities’ institutional capacity, whether the institution is coherently organized, has adequate management and administrative arrangements and the necessary infrastructure and financial resources for a stable functioning in the short and medium term, as well as the necessary human resources for achieving its stated mission and objectives. However, the main focus of the only institution responsible for quality assurance (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ARACIS) has been on the first two cycles, while doctoral education has been closely linked to research and, therefore, considered to be the responsibility of different institutions. For the past years, there has been an ongoing debate on whose responsibility the quality assurance of doctoral studies is, based on what standards should it be assessed and, sadly enough, the national provisions have gone through a continuous change according to this different views.

Therefore, in an attempt to follow the evolution of the national provisions, we can observe a few stages:

- According to the National Law of Education No.1/2011 (when adopted), Art. 158 listed the following provisions:

(4) Each Doctorate Organizing School is assessed individually, for each area, for accreditation. The assessment of the Doctorate Organizing School is made based on its performance and on the institutional capacity of IOSUD to which the Doctorate Organizing School belongs. The assessment of the Doctorate Organizing Schools is made by ARACIS or by another national or foreign agency for the quality assurance, based on the CNCS reports in the quality of the research and on the CNATDCU reports on the quality of the human resources. The criteria system and the assessment methodology are set by order of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports, based on joint proposals of ARACIS, CNCS and CNATDCU. Each Doctorate Organizing School is assessed periodically, every 5 years.

(5) Based on the results of the evaluation, ARACIS or the agency mentioned in paragraph (4) propose to the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports the granting or withdrawal of the right to organize PhD education programs, as the case may be. The right to organize PhD programs is certified by an order of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports.

- The Official Monitor of Romania dating August 2011 adopts *The code of university doctoral studies*, document that currently governs the organizing of doctoral studies in Romania. Even though the contained provisions regarding quality assurance followed the same path as described in the National Law of Education (see above), the described procedures for accreditation were never put in practice.
- At a later stage (October 2011), ARACIS proposed to the Ministry of National Education a draft of the institution’s revised methodology (which was not yet adopted) which stated that “*The accreditation of the Doctorate Organizing Schools and doctoral study domains is done by ARACIS based on the CNCS reports in the quality of the research and on the CNATDCU reports on the quality of the human resources. The criteria system and the review methodology are established through a ministerial order based on common proposals of ARACIS, CNCS and CNADTCU.*”
- The Order of the Ministry of Education no. 3.850 from May 2012 adopted the methodology for the external evaluation for the provisional authorization, accreditation and periodical evaluation of the Doctoral Schools following the same task division between the three above mentioned institutions.
- An Emergency Ordinance was initiated by the Government in December 2012 without any references to the quality assurance of the doctoral studies. The document was published in the Official Monitor of Romania during the same month and started having effects on Romanian Higher Education. When continuing its legislative path in the Parliament chambers and committees, the ordinance was amended by the Commission for Education, Knowledge, Youth and Sport modifying the above mentioned articles

of the Law, moving the quality assurance of the doctoral studies to a different institution than ARACIS, as follows:

(4) Each Doctorate Organizing School is assessed individually, for each area, for accreditation. The assessment of the Doctorate Organizing School is made based on its performance and on the institutional capacity of IOSUD to which the Doctorate Organizing School belongs. The assessment of the Doctorate Organizing Schools is made by CNATDCU. The criteria system and the assessment methodology are set by order of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports, based on CNATDCU proposals. Each Doctorate Organizing School is assessed periodically, every 5 years.

(5) Based on the results of the evaluation, CNATDCU proposes to the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports the granting or withdrawal of the right to organize PhD education programs, as the case may be. The right to organize PhD programs is certified by an order of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports.

Given the fact that the amended version is still stuck in the consultation structures of the Parliament, quality assurance of the doctoral studies is still attributed to the national quality assurance agency.

- Currently, institutions willing to go through external quality assurance processes for their doctoral studies are recommended by the Ministry of National Education to follow *The methodology for the external evaluation for the provisional authorization, accreditation and periodical evaluation of the Doctoral Schools* adopted in May 2012.

All in all, we can strongly affirm that the quality assurance of doctoral studies is a foggy, neglected, underestimated field which cannot be found under the priorities of any national institution. Apparently, part of the institutions that consider authorizing Doctoral Schools as major priority for their research development have addressed the Ministry of National Education with the proposal that the University Senates will be responsible for the establishment of the Doctoral Schools, based on the institutional autonomy granted by the Romanian Constitution. It is uncertain at the moment whether the Ministry agrees with this proposal, but this seems for some institutions to be the only applicable procedure given the legislation blockage. Following the methodology recommended by the ministry as legitimate framework for establishment of the doctoral schools, a big number of contradictions can be observed, some of them would even lead to the closing down of the existing doctoral schools. On the other hand, another uncertainty if caused by the fact that ARACIS itself has proposed a methodology for the evaluation of the doctoral schools (drafted in 2011, mentioned above), yet it is unclear to which extent was this document incorporated in the methodology promoted by the Ministry.

Content wise, the document considered by the ministry as being the legitimate methodology for the evaluation of doctoral studies aims at reviewing the same 3 segments that serve as basis for the quality assurance of undergraduate studies, as follows:

- Institutional capacity containing indicators related to: library infrastructure and materials available, infrastructure of the laboratories used for teaching and research activities, remuneration and infrastructure for staff, IT resources available for doctoral candidates, number of PhD supervisors and of admitted PhD candidates for the past 5 years, available expenses for equipment, infrastructure and research materials, involvement of the doctoral school in community projects.
- Educational efficiency containing indicators related to: curriculum (disciplines, credits, hours allocated), graduates' employability and internationalization, results from the research activities, relationship of the doctoral school with the socio-economic environment, quality of human resources, resources available for the research activity, internationalization, social and cultural involvement of the school.
- Quality management containing indicators related to: mission, objectives and economic integrity, management and administration of the doctoral school, strategies and procedures for quality assurance (existence of a self-evaluation methodology, analyses of the self-evaluation processes regarding doctoral candidates and supervisors, functioning of the self-evaluation procedures).

2. Quality indicators for doctoral studies

Following the content part of the standards and indicators for quality assurance of the doctoral studies, it is crucial for a system which is currently going through a development phase to benchmark with more performing systems. Therefore, we are going to use the data obtained by EUA's ARDE research project in order to draft proposals for indicators that could be used in developing a functional doctoral studies QA system.

- Clear, formal and transparent procedures for admission
- Systematically monitor the capacity and progress of doctoral candidates through Progress Reports/Milestones
- The outcomes of doctoral studies and the methods in place for evaluating the outputs (quality of the thesis, composition and selection of the thesis committee).
- Tracking and career development opportunities (periodically tracking the careers of graduates, offering career development support for doctoral candidates, transferable skills trainings, systematically monitor the quality of the career services themselves, usage careers of doctorate holders as an indicator for the evaluation of the quality of doctoral programmes)
- Internationalization
- Candidate satisfaction
- Supervision (collective effort with clearly defined and written responsibilities): written regulations and/or guidelines for supervision containing maximum number of doctoral candidates per supervisor, obligatory training for supervisors, voluntary training for supervisors, requirement or recommendation for minimum number of meetings with the supervisor(s), requirement or recommendation for supervisory teams, written agreements between supervisors, supervisees and/or institution, procedures for dealing with supervisor-supervisee conflicts, systematic feedback collected from doctoral candidates, procedures for dealing with supervisor-supervisee conflicts.
- Clear programme components (skills training and course offers)
- The capacity of the institution, departments and programmes to carry out good research and to train doctoral candidates
- Research environment, infrastructure and availability of funding
- The quality of staff
- Existence of national and international networks and diversity (including interdisciplinarity) of researchers
- Inclusive environment which promoted mutual respect and interaction between all members of an institution's research community
- Professional development of supervisors (training for supervision, informal peer-learning groups, Introductory courses to supervision)
- Time-to-degree and completion rates analysis

The list above is, of course, a non-exclusive one, but is based on examples of good practice from countries that have a functional system of assuring the quality of doctoral education. When asked the question regarding what indicators are used in external evaluations at programme level and department/discipline level, 101 institutions (out of the 112 participating in the ARDE project) provided the answers that can be observed below.

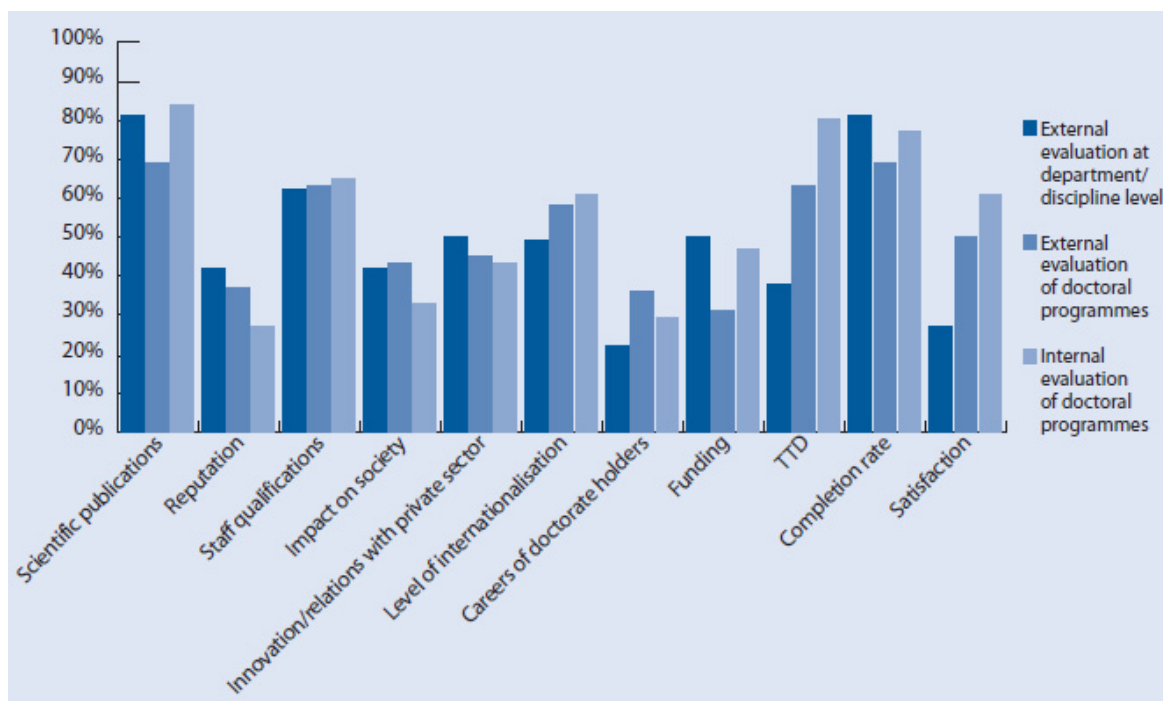


Fig. 1. The use of indicators in quality assurance of doctoral education

Conclusions

While indicators can be useful for monitoring the performance of a programme, they need to be complemented by other sources of information. Indicators should always be considered in the context of the programme and institution as a whole. The interpretation of completion rates and time-to-degree should be, for example highly dependent on regulations concerning admission to doctoral education. Moreover, terminology concerning key performance indicators is not uniform. There may be a need to develop indicators to meet different needs. External evaluation bodies may have different needs to strategic management at the institutional level or management at the programme level.

We believe, however, that the focus of the external evaluation of doctoral education should primarily be there to check if an institution's own quality assurance system is in place, thus respecting the university's academic autonomy. This approach would also allow for taking into account the diversity of institutions and programmes, where the focus would be on the fitness for purpose of the quality processes in the particular context. Universities would be therefore expected to develop quality assurance systems for themselves based on their own needs and goals. The external review will evaluate how well the quality system meets these goals and needs – both strategically and operationally – as well as the extent to which it is comprehensive and effective. The system is expected to cover all activities of the university, including research and innovation and doctoral education, which is part of the degree education audit target.

There are legitimate concerns regarding the external evaluations, not least because of the added bureaucracy they may, in the worst case scenario, lead to. However, universities in systems with no evaluations underlined that external evaluations would be extremely useful to the university. They offer a university the opportunity to undergo a 'reality check' through an external view on the state of affairs, and external evaluations have the potential to give incentives for change, such as improving or correcting aspects of the programme or introducing something completely new. Universities operating in systems with weak or non-existing national frameworks for evaluating doctoral education miss out on the possibility of comparing and benchmarking themselves with other institutions.

With regard to monitoring in particular, it is important to think of the purpose for which the information is used: information should facilitate the quality enhancement of doctoral education and it should be clear and transparent who is responsible for taking action in relation to solving problems and improving procedures. Only in this way can the university be certain that it is “closing the feedback loop”, a crucial element of the functionality of internal quality assurance system.

Probably the most important conclusion/recommendation of the sends us to the 2010 Salzburg Recommendations which clearly states that the “The main outcome of doctoral education [is] the early-stage researchers”. The outcome is no longer the research results to be defended in front of an expert panel, but a doctorate holder with specific research and transferable skills and experiences, which can be used in a wide range of careers. “In a diverse society, leadership development is more important than in a homogeneous society, because leaders are required to submit in new values, to mediate conflicts and create coalitions to support reform.” (Bibu, 2012). Research which focuses on the way change is conceptualized at an individual level can lead to the most appropriate strategies to manage and implement the educational reforms successfully. Thus, there is an identified need to articulate the change agenda according to research in the field of education (Iucu, 2013).

All in all, let us borne in mind that the reasons for setting up quality assurance in doctoral education have been largely similar to the first and second cycle: to ensure accountability and transparency as well as to engage in a process of continued quality enhancement.

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